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English Language Learners: Becoming Fluent in Afterschool

Afterschool programs in which literacy is a component offer the potential to provide ELLs with much needed support, not just academically, but socially and culturally as well.ⁱ

English Language Learners (ELLs), a diverse group of individuals from across the world who are learning English for the first time, make up the fastest growing segment of the student population in United States public schools. Eighty-percent of the ELL population is Spanish-speaking, but they represent a diverse group of children with distinct needs. Most ELLs (65%) were born in the United States, but many have parents born outside of the U.S. with limited English skills.ⁱⁱ The large number of immigrants to the U.S. over the past decade and a half has led to a surge in the number of ELL students in U.S. public schools with more than 1 in 10 public school students classified as an ELL in 2008.ⁱⁱⁱ Between 1995 and 2005, nationwide enrollment of ELLs increased by 57 percent. This does not represent an even distribution throughout the U.S. though. Certain states experienced an especially large surge in their ELL population, and many schools are failing to adjust to the rapid population shifts and new needs of their heavily ELL student population.^{iv} With schools lacking the funding and necessary staff to help this new crop of students, English Language Learners have lagged behind their English-speaking peers on standardized tests. These students could greatly benefit from additional time and support to learn both the English language and the academic content being taught in schools. With school days that are increasingly focused on stringent curriculums and testing, many ELL students have much to gain from the less formal enrichment available outside of the school day. Afterschool programs, with lower student-staff ratios, flexible schedules and informal environments, can better target individual needs and offer ELL students a chance to practice communicating in their new language.

The Challenge for English Language Learners and their Schools

ELL students are tasked with the two-fold challenge of learning a new language and simultaneously keeping up with academic content taught in a language they have not yet mastered. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that many ELLs come from economically disadvantaged circumstances and have parents who may not themselves have high school diplomas, both of which are independent risk factors for a lack of academic success.^v Furthermore, schools have struggled to support ELL students. In 2009, only 6 percent of ELL fourth graders tested as proficient in reading, compared to 36 percent of English-speaking fourth graders, and only 12 percent of ELL fourth graders tested as proficient in math as compared to 41 percent of English-speaking fourth graders.^{vi}

Adding to the challenges faced by the education system in helping the growing ELL population, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) holds schools accountable for achieving 100 percent grade-level proficiency among

their ELL students in English language arts and Mathematics by 2014. The ELL population, though, is constantly changing to include new students who have not yet learned English and exclude students previously categorized as ELLs who, after successfully mastering English, are redesignated as English Proficient.^{vii} While NCLB allows some flexibility for native language testing for reading proficiency in the first three years a student is enrolled in the public school system, multiple studies have shown that it often takes up to six or seven years to establish full academic fluency in a second language.^{viii} The requirement of proficiency on standardized tests administered in English on a faster time scale than English tends to be learned puts pressure on ELLs and schools to accelerate English language acquisition as much as possible, yet time and other demands restrict school day educators in this pursuit.

Alternatively, afterschool programs allow for more flexibility and time, and therefore serve as a great platform for providing the extra enrichment and English language practice it will take to help students and schools achieve their goals. Because of the greater flexibility, afterschool programs are often better able to take advantage of the assets that ELL students bring to the table, such as their knowledge of other places, languages, customs and cultures. By supporting relationships and interactions among English language-speaking students and ELLs, all students – and even staff – benefit and are better prepared for increasingly diverse workplaces and communities.

What ELLs Need to Succeed

While more research is needed to establish definitive best practices for teaching ELLs, studies agree that a variety of teaching strategies should be used in conjunction with one another to support ELL language acquisition.^{ix} Students benefit from:

- Direct language instruction^x
- Opportunities to practice oral language skills^{xi}
- Language scaffolding during academic content instruction^{xii}
- Parent and community engagement^{xiii}
- Cultural background knowledge^{xiv}

Across the nation, schools offer different models for teaching ELL students and some focus more heavily on certain areas than others. The most successful models, however, are the ones that include a comprehensive student-centered curriculum that incorporates each feature. However, ELL students rarely have the speaking time during the school day to truly engage in all of these practices. In fact, during the school day, ELL students average less than 90 seconds per day in classroom talk time.^{xv} This is where afterschool can step in and support the acquisition of expanded vocabulary through fun activities that utilize the English language and challenge ELLs to expand their literacy.

Afterschool Programs Offer Additional Supports to Help ELLs Thrive in the Classroom

Afterschool programs can complement the language instruction provided to ELL students during the regular school day by offering extra time for both direct language instruction and practicing oral language skills. Programs outside of the school day are also less restricted by curriculum and testing requirements than school-day classes, which means they have more flexibility to tailor programs to the language and learning needs of individual students. Afterschool programs can offer ELL students:

- A low-pressure environment to practice communicating in English while playing games or engaging in hands-on activities without the worry of being graded
- Generally lower student-to-staff ratios
- More parent and community involvement and engagement as parents are less intimidated by the informal structure of afterschool and instructors can act as brokers between families and school teachers
- A chance to build confidence in a stress-free environment with students in similar circumstances
- Homework help to support academic achievement
- Additional time for learner-centered direct language instruction
- A chance to learn more about American culture and share students' backgrounds by participating in cultural events (music, theater, holiday celebrations)
- Direct language instruction that does not require students to be pulled out of academic content lessons

While ELL students often do not get much opportunity to practice using oral language during the school day, afterschool programs offer varied opportunities for children to talk with peers and adults, one-on-one and in groups, while engaging in a variety of low-pressure activities. As students develop relationships within the afterschool community, they are able to feel more comfortable trying out new language skills without fear of judgment. These oral language skills lay a foundation for literacy development and help support academic achievement.^{xvi} Opportunities to practice English language skills are particularly valuable to ELLs who speak a language other than English at home.

Events that engage families and communities and that offer children background cultural experience can help ELL students to connect with school and learning in a way that they may not normally if only presented with academics in a structured and pressured environment. For example, musical and dramatic performances give children a chance to showcase their developing talents in a supportive, family-friendly community environment.

Afterschool Programs are Already Helping ELLs to Succeed

Established afterschool programs are making impressive gains with their ELL student participants. Studies have shown that regular participation in afterschool programs correlates to higher rates of school attendance among ELLs as well as English-speaking students.^{xvii} Greater attendance means students have more opportunities to benefit from instruction and correlates to greater investment in school and education. Statistics also show higher rates of reclassification as English Proficient among ELL students who attend afterschool programs regularly.^{xviii} This result holds even when students attend afterschool programs that do not focus on language acquisition specifically,^{xix} suggesting that even without direct language instruction after school, the opportunity to practice English language skills in a supportive environment can make a real difference for kids.

Afterschool programs that focus on the whole child, including their home life and social influences, can address needs that undergird their struggles with language and help them become better overall students and citizens.

- **Community Lodgings** in Alexandria, Virginia, serves homeless and low-income families by providing transitional housing as well as career counseling and budget mentoring for parents, as well as their Youth Education Program, funded through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, that provides academic assistance, a safe alternative for gang influence and a focus on avoidance of at-risk behaviors. Community Lodgings serves a population that is entirely low-income and 82% Latino, including many ELLs. Elementary and Middle School participants in the afterschool program improved their academic performance from the 2008-09 to 2009-10 school years by nearly ten percent in math and English.^{xx}

Providing children with a comfortable environment with like-minded ELLs in similar circumstances can ease the process for many youth who feel alienated due to their lack of English proficiency during the regular school day, leading to academic gains and increased engagement in learning.

- **Latin American Youth Center (LAYC)** in Washington, D.C., serves a predominantly Latino population, including many ELL students. LAYC's varied multilingual afterschool program offerings include educational enhancement, social services, workforce investment, art and media as well as advocacy. In the 2008-09 school year, 58 percent of elementary students receiving regular tutoring through LAYC's Americorps partnership increased either their language arts or math grade by a full letter grade over the course of the year, and 31 percent increased both math and language arts grades by a full letter grade.^{xxi}

Many immigrants face a lack of steady work, leaving their children bouncing around from school to school. Afterschool programs can help build a stable learning environment for ELLs in these difficult situations.

- **Montana Migrant Education Program** in Helena, Montana, serves children of migrant workers who have changed school districts within the past three years to accommodate a parent seeking temporary or seasonal employment; 70 percent of its participants are ELLs. Montana Migrant Education Program focuses on academic achievement and self-esteem building for students who are disadvantaged in education by language barriers, poverty and a migratory lifestyle. During its 2010 summer program, 79 percent of participants improved in reading by an average of 11 percent, and 99 percent of participants improved in math by an average of 20 percent.^{xxii}

Recognizing the assets that ELLs bring to the learning environment and providing them with ample opportunities to contribute, in a variety of formats, is key to the success of efforts to support language acquisition.

- The **CORAL Program** in California is intentionally structured to create strong relationships among students and between students and staff. Staff members are often young adults who share a cultural and linguistic background with the students and they often capitalize on that connection to create multicultural, multilingual learning opportunities. Staff members also use their knowledge of students' languages and cultures to create high-quality literacy lessons that provide students an opportunity to share their own experiences, family backgrounds, languages and cultures, and to deepen their understanding of, and connection to, a variety of

cultures. English learners participating in CORAL achieve academic gains in equal measure to other children in the program—suggesting that CORAL offers a promising approach to strengthening literacy skills in the afterschool hours.^{xxiii}

Federal Funding Streams Can Help Support Afterschool Programs Targeted at Supporting ELLs

The federal government understands the importance of supporting ELLs working to get on track toward academic success and has provided funding to afterschool programs to support that endeavor. There are a number of federal funding streams currently supporting ELLs through afterschool:

- **The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative** offers federal funding to afterschool programs serving low-income communities that advance the academic achievement of participants through scientifically proven methods, including “programs that provide afterschool activities for limited English proficient students that emphasize language skills and academic achievement.”^{xxiv}
 - **Requirements:** Must provide academic enrichment activities in the core academic subjects (reading, math, science) to students who attend schools in areas of high levels of poverty. Activities must be continuously evaluated based on performance measures and if appropriate should be based on scientific research. Programs must also provide related services to students’ families.^{xxv}
- **Title III of No Child Left Behind** offers funding to support language acquisition and literacy development of ELL students and their families. These funds may be available to afterschool programs serving ELLs and their families that apply in conjunction with public schools serving these students during the regular school day.^{xxvi}
 - **Requirements:** Must provide language instruction supported by scientifically-based research demonstrating the program’s effectiveness at increasing both English language proficiency and achievement in the core academic subjects.^{xxvii}
- **Refugee School Impact Grants** are offered through the Office of Refugee Resettlement within the Department of Health and Human Services. The grants fund services that target school-age refugees between the ages of 5 and 18. Services include English as a Second Language instruction, afterschool tutorials, programs that encourage high school completion and full participation in school activities, parental involvement programs, bilingual/bicultural counselors and interpreter services.^{xxviii}
 - **Requirements:** Programs must be adequately facilitating the school adaptation and education of refugee children based upon their particular situations.^{xxix}

How Policy Can Promote Language Learning in Afterschool Programs

The following federal policy recommendations support the concept that participation by ELLs in the informal learning environments of afterschool, before school and summer learning programs increase students’ likelihood of success:

- Increase federal funding for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative as a primary source of federal afterschool and summer learning funds that serve ELL students. Improve data

collection and sharing in order to provide a clearer picture of how many ELLs are served by the 21st CCLC initiative.

- Facilitate the collection and sharing of best practices from existing comprehensive afterschool, before school and summer learning programs that serve high ELL populations, including strategies that lead to positive academic and social-emotional outcomes.
- Incorporate into existing funding streams professional development opportunities for classroom teachers and afterschool educators focused on how to best work with ELLs.
- Include a focus on serving ELL students in federal science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) and/or physical activity promotion programs that fund afterschool and summer learning programs.

Conclusion

With the United States' ever-growing immigrant population, English Language Learners will continue to make up a larger and larger portion of U.S. students. Schools have traditionally struggled to incorporate English language learning during the school day and often are unable to maximize the assets that ELLs bring to the classroom and offer the informal and flexible learning environment that ELLs need.

However, quality afterschool programs, with less rigid structures, provide an environment where ELLs can hone their English speaking skills so that they can become English proficient and succeed in school. While some afterschool programs are offering these supports and seeing great results among their ELL populations, more programs with expertise in supporting ELLs are needed to keep up with the number of ELL students entering U.S. public schools. Aid from policy makers and increased funding from federal, state and local funding sources can help ELLs gain greater access to beneficial afterschool opportunities so that they can learn English as quickly as possible and join their peers on the pathway to more enriching learning experiences. With adequate supports and attention, today's ELLs can become bilingual individuals who function well across languages and cultures and valued members of tomorrow's global economy.

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